



Walking Our Way to Lower Healthcare Costs

Posted by [Pierluigi Oliverio](#) on Monday, October 29, 2007

This week I am writing about the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Most of the time, sadly, we hear these words of good advice but don't make the conscious effort to apply healthy choices to our usual routines. Perhaps some of you who are reading this may think that writing about the benefits of a healthy lifestyle, one which includes "eating right" and "exercising," may not have anything to do with city government. I politely disagree.

Rising healthcare costs are a detriment to every employer—public or private. Higher healthcare costs equate to less city services; or, in private sector, it may mean not hiring a new employee.

I recently met with Eric Larsen, President of AFSCME Local 101, regarding wellness programs. Eric shared with me that 15 percent of the employees of the City of San Jose are responsible for 80 percent of the medical costs that the city endures. This percentage shines light on a serious issue.

The issue of wellness and preventative care is not new; however, its implementation is rather slow. Popping a few pills takes much less time than walking the Guadalupe River Park. Eating healthy and exercising regularly is called preventative care.

For example, a member of my staff recently suffered a swollen knee which made it difficult for her to walk. The doctor explained that she had a weak knee and that for her knee to improve she would need to exercise or have surgery. Her treatment consisted of different exercises specifically for her knees. Even though it took time, her knee is much better and she is now exercising and avoided costly surgery.

People who maintain a healthy lifestyle pose less of a health risk and thus less of an economic risk to health care providers. Avoiding extra weight, lowering blood pressure, keeping cholesterol in check, among other things, are positive ways that we can demonstrate that we take our health seriously. Sadly, many adults do not see a doctor on a regular basis but only when they are already sick or have a problem that needs immediate and more costly attention.

In an effort to bring awareness to the importance of exercise, I am continuing the City Hall Stair Challenge on November 7th at City Hall. This event was started by Supervisor Ken Yeager. Ken was a smoker at one point in his life. He decided to stop smoking and is now an accomplished marathon runner. Although many people will be participating in the eightee-story Stair Challenge, it is also a symbolic gesture and reminder that any type of physical activity is important.

Recently, the City of San Jose was voted the "8th Best Walking City in the United States." This great news leads me into an idea that I want to share. Why not take advantage of San Jose's "Best Walking" title and incorporate walking tours from City Hall.

I want to challenge you to think about putting together walking routes that start and end at City Hall. They should be different in length and take you to different areas within the downtown. There are many different options that one could take going in all directions from City Hall that include different neighborhoods, park, landmarks, and retail stores, etc., that are missed by driving in a car. Let's get out of the car and start experiencing our surroundings by walking.

The city has over 2,000 employees that work at 200 East Santa Clara Street. Can you imagine if just half or a quarter walked 3 times a week?

I propose that the City of San Jose take a proactive approach to promoting healthy lifestyles and that we get the insurance carriers involved so that we can attempt to get quality healthcare that costs less.

Something else I learned from Mr. Larsen was that the City of San Jose has been given a \$200,000 grant for wellness. The city has not yet decided how the money should be spent.

I will take this opportunity to share my thoughts about how the money could be spent. For example, I would like to promote web-based tracking that all city employees (including myself) could log into when they walk and/or exercise. Sharing personal exercising data would not be mandatory; however, the system could be accessed by the healthcare providers and if employees wanted to share their information with others, they could. The City of San Jose could use this information to attempt to receive lower healthcare rates. This idea resembles car insurance. When one has a good driving record, their costs are lower. Of course, it would be cumulative. However, if the City of San Jose negotiated right, I think it would be pretty hard for the healthcare industry to ignore the nation's tenth largest city's proactive approach for promoting healthy lifestyles.

The walking routes (that I mentioned above) could be located on the cities intranet so that city employees could choose to walk different routes during lunch or on their free time. The intranet setup would allow for employees to track their progress. This set-up could cost well under the \$200,000 grant. Imagine if there were 15 plus walking routes that employees could choose from. The walking routes could be shared with others and possibly used as promotional material for City Hall and the Downtown Association.

And, if there is not the support to spend a portion of the \$200,000 for database purposes, there are many FREE websites that allow you to track your fitness goals. Even if we did not create an intranet to store the employees' fitness information, the city could ask employees if they would like to share their results from the FREE fitness websites so that the city could share this information with the health insurance carriers when it's time to negotiate, thus showing that San Jose is serious about proactive preventative wellness care.

Do you have a favorite walking route you want to share? Even though it's October, the weather still lends itself to walking downtown.

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